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LAW FIRM RECRUITING

## Women Can Work It Out

One partner's personal  
recipe for success.

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stats%20-%206.pdf. This gender ratio has remained largely unchanged in the last 10 years (for instance, the 2006-2007 entering law school classes were comprised 46.3 percent of women). See id.

**N**early 10 years ago, I sat in my law school orientation with a palpable excitement—bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, pencils sharpened, the whole bit. I was ready to absorb whatever the professors had to offer me (of course, my tune was moderated, but not completely changed, after a few burning Socratic experiences and exasperating exams).

My excitement was further heightened by the dean's announcement that day that for the first time, New York

University's entering law school class consisted of slightly more women than men. As a Generation X-er who had been nurtured in the womb of education rather than tested in the workforce, the statistic confirmed for me that "mommy tracks" and "glass ceilings" were relics that were gone for good.

The gender parity celebrated that day was not unique to NYU, although NYU's statistic was slightly better than most American law schools at the time, whose 1995-1996 entering classes averaged 44.6 percent women. See American Bar Association, "First Year and Total J.D. Enrollment by Gender – 1947-2005," available at <http://www.abanet.org/legaled/statistics/charts/>

In the ensuing three years of law school, I was honored to befriend and study amongst some of the most brilliant men and women I have ever known. I assumed that they would, more or less in equal parts, remain my colleagues once we were unleashed on the world. But, 10 years later, the number of female partners at the 200 largest law firms remains relative small and far less than 50 percent. See National Association of Women Lawyers, "National Survey of Retention and Promotion of Women in Law Firms" (October 2006), available at <http://www.abanet.org/nawl/docs/NAWIFINALPUBLICATION10-25-06SURVEYREPORT.pdf>

The numbers of women in the

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partnerships of these firms is slightly better, but not significantly so, for women who graduated from law school after 1980. *Id.* Even though women constitute approximately 45 percent of the associates at those same firms, that high percentage is not migrating into the partnership and a significant gender imbalance remains.

Using the admittedly blunt assumption that approximately 50 percent of the best and brightest law school graduates are women, then, if the attrition of female lawyers stays its course, such that substantially less than 50 percent of the partnerships are female, law firms will necessarily have hemorrhaged diversity and talent.

The fact that men are achieving success at rates that far exceed their female counterparts at law firms is not news; nor will it surprise most firm lawyers that the attrition rate at law firms is significantly higher for women than for men. The confounding issue is: What is the cause for the disconnect?

The reasons men and women choose to stay at a law firm and make the push for partnership can't possibly be different: They are doing interesting and satisfying work, for which they are well paid, in a supportive, team environment that inspires loyalty and is consistent with a meaningful personal life.

Firms have struggled with varying degrees of success to increase retention of their female associates and push them toward the partnership. While firms diligently search for the apparently elusive recipe for retention, I can only reflect upon what made my accession possible while raising two children along the way.

I possess no superhuman staying power. Indeed, after all attempts to clone myself failed, I pressed forward with my own recipe: equal parts copious use of technology and a

supportive firm culture, with a heaping spoonful of being at peace with the unpredictability of my schedule.

Whether we like it or not, lawyers are servants in a service industry, for which the world (clients, courts, counter-parties, adversaries, etc.) does not patiently wait. Accepting—no, embracing—this proposition was critical.

Based on the success of this recipe for me, I would counsel any woman (or man) looking to balance a high-octane law firm career with that little thing we call life, to identify a law firm that offers the following:

- ***A robust technological infrastructure that includes at a minimum, laptops, BlackBerry devices, and access to the firm's network through an Internet portal.***

Although some lawyers have taken umbrage at the fact that they can now work anytime and anywhere, I viewed it as increased flexibility. Adding these gadgets to my life exponentially increased the places from which I was able to meaningfully work, including from my son's nursery school office and under a palm tree in Puerto Rico (of course, also mindful that I was not creating BlackBerry orphans of my children).

- ***A culture in which the tone from the top down is one where lawyers gladly pinch hit for each other to accommodate life beyond work.*** I am nearly certain that I would have been a statistic had I not worked in a firm in which "face time" was a non-issue, and I felt supported by my colleagues. (Yes, it does take a village). Certainly, I did my own pinch-hitting for my colleagues as well, and happily so.

On the flip side, working from remote places or relying on colleagues to sacrifice so that you might attend a wedding, a recital, a dinner, etc., is effectively like a credit system. I

raised credit by making sure that my working from home or at odd hours was not at the expense of the client work or my colleagues' schedules, and reciprocated without fuss. In essence, it works if you follow some old adages: First do no harm—then, spend credit wisely.

My ingredients are of course not a substitute for the traditional bells and whistles of law firms that are supportive of work-life balance: the availability of part-time schedules, generous parental leave policies, diversity initiatives, etc. But, these programs, while infinitely valuable, have simply not yet evolved to the perfect formula for the retention of female talent in law firms.

Until that time, I would encourage young lawyers to seek a law firm in which they are confident that they can cook up their own recipes to maximize law firm and life success. •